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Blurring the Boundaries? Supporting Students and Staff within an Online Learning Environment

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Abstract

The inclusion of online learning technologies into the higher education (HE) curriculum is frequently associated with the design and development of new models of learning. One could argue that e-learning even demands a reconfiguration of traditional methods of learning and teaching. One of the key elements of this transformational process is flexibility. This paper considers a number of aspects relating to the flexibility inherent within models of online learning and the potential impact of this on support structures. City University, London, is used as a case study to provide examples of online practice which support strategies outlined here. A number of models of online learning are used at the University to provide evidence of the variation in modes of support and illustrate the different needs of both students and staff when using these forms of learning. What is apparent through this discussion is that to provide effective support for online learners, whether students or staff, clear and solid structures need to be put in place to assist with the creation of an online community.

Keywords

e-learning, online learning, virtual learning environments, learner support

Introduction

The inclusion of online learning technologies into the higher education (HE) curriculum is frequently associated with the design and development of new models of learning. One could argue that e-learning even demands a reconfiguration of traditional methods of learning and teaching. A recent consultation consultative e-learning strategy developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) acknowledges this:

the internet and use of new technologies are changing the total operation of HE. Learning and teaching are changing as we explore the possibilities presented by new technologies (HEFCE, 2003, p.2).

However, this transformation in pedagogic methodology does not just impact on lecturers and teachers alone, as the HEFCE e-learning strategy continues 'these technologies are also bringing about new approaches in research, libraries and resources and administration' (p.2). Online learning has 'pervasive impacts and changes in other HE functions' (HEFCE, p.2). Thus, e-learning is a transformational process that posits new challenges for staff and students, both in educational methods and support.

One of the key elements of this transformational process is flexibility. Online learning is often described as providing more responsive modes of study for learners and theories of online course design frequently refer to the ability of e-learning to accommodate diverse learning styles and forms of delivery. For example, Palloff and Pratt (2001) state that 'teaching online requires a new approach to pedagogy' (p.12). This is important, they continue, because 'the online re-creation of the face-to-face classroom can be a dismal failure' (p.12).

Teaching in the cyberspace classroom requires that we move beyond traditional models of pedagogy into new practices that are more facilitative. Teaching in cyberspace involves much more than simply taking old "tried and tested" models of pedagogy and transferring them to a different medium (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p.20).

Constructivist educational theory, in particular, is often used as a key tenet for online course design as this form of learning argues that 'people construct their own knowledge, and are socially influenced in all thinking and learning' (LTSN, 2004).¹ One source even goes so far as to argue that 'essentially, elearning is the realization of the theoretical/conceptual components of flexible learning' (elearnspace, 2004). Yet, while such flexibility is desirable and beneficial in many ways, the challenges and changes to traditional models of support for all users of such technology can cause problems.

This paper considers a number of aspects relating to the flexibility inherent within models of online learning and the potential impact of this on support structures. City University, London, is used as a case study to provide examples of online practice which support strategies outlined here (the conference presentation will give more specific examples of models used at City). In 2003, City University introduced a campus-wide managed learning environment and established an ELearning Unit (ELU) to support the development and dissemination of online learning practice across the University. This initiative provides central support for staff and students in the use of online learning, both from a pedagogic and

¹ For an informative review of how consideration of online course design is posited in transformational flexible terms see the section on 'Models of Learning' in Sarah Cornelius (2002), *Learning Online: Models and Styles*, <http://otis.scotcit.ac.uk/onlinebook/otisT103.htm>

technical perspective. The rationale behind centralizing support for e-learning was to ensure a consistent and co-ordinated approach to developing technological learning solutions. However, introducing a campus wide online learning environment has raised significant issues surrounding student support and the 'e-readiness' of the organisation. A balance has had to be reached between ensuring that generic quality standards are maintained and a centrally-designed approach is applied across all online modules to ensure consistency and the need to offer flexibility around the needs of individual Departments and subject areas.

A number of models of online learning, from wholly distance to enhanced classroom delivery are in operation at City. These models provide evidence of the variation in modes of support and illustrate the different needs of both students and staff when using these forms of learning. The philosophy of the ELU in supporting these models is outlined as a methodology for providing strategic solutions to the challenges posed by the flexibility of this mode of delivery. What is apparent through this discussion is that to provide effective support for online learners, whether students or staff, clear and solid structures need to be put in place to assist with the creation of an online community.

However, before considering this in more detail, it is necessary to consider some of the benefits and challenges of flexible learning in terms of online learning practice. This discussion raises some of the potential issues in support learners online.

Flexibility and e-learning – benefits and problems

If e-learning is integrated into the curriculum in a thoughtful and considered fashion, it can have many potential benefits. As Palloff and Pratt (2001) caution, 'administrators, along with faculty and students, need to be educated about the realities of online teaching and the impact that good courseware can have on this process' (p.12). So what are the potential benefits and how do these impact on support strategies?

Independent/autonomous learning

Through using educational technologies students have more control over the management of their learning. Meeting the diverse learning styles of students is a key aspect inherent within flexible online learning:

Online courses have the potential to reach a large number of learners. Each learner is an individual, with his or her own motivation for studying, access to resources, and study habits and practices (Cornelius, 2002, section 2: learning styles).

E-learning theoretically allows students to access materials anywhere, anytime, thereby enabling them to pace their learning and structure the course around other activities. As Littlejohn and Higgison (2003) maintain 'e-learning is seen as offering solutions to several challenges currently facing HE [...] the move towards lifelong learning [...] and the drive to

widen participation' (p.8). However, students do still require some structure in order to enable them to retain engagement with the course. The Masters in Geographic Information (MGI) at City, which is taught through wholly online delivery, provides this in the form of clear coursework deadlines and other regular 'check-in' points so that learners do not feel isolated or disorientated. This has resulted in high levels of retention. Tracking and monitoring distance learning students in particular is valuable, but a concern for staff is how to design relevant activities that students will engage with? How should we support these new forms of engagement?

Peer support

Simpson (2000) notes that 'education [...] is essentially a process of dialogue' (p.9) and the communication tools inherent within the online learning environment can assist with this by facilitating peer support. For example, conferencing and discussion tools enable learners to interact independently from tutors – often reassuring each other and enabling students to share professional issues. The Centre for Professional Development and Innovation (CPDI) at City uses discussion boards for vocationally based courses and asks students to draw on work-related experiences to complete assignments. This can be helpful in reducing the burden of academic staff, but managing discussion boards can be time consuming and still need monitoring. How can we prepare staff and students for the kind of interaction?

Responsive learning and teaching

E-learning can be more responsive to the needs of both tutors and students, as outlined in Peters' research on learners' views of online delivery (2001). As students are engaged in a number of different forms of communication, new strategies to assist with the learning process can be utilised quickly and easily. For example, the MGI course uses chat sessions to clarify a certain topic. When e-learning is used to support face-to-face teaching then lectures may become more like seminars, with students accessing material prior to the lecture and then using the lecture time to ask questions and discuss certain issues in more depth. This technique is used in the Department of Information Science to facilitate greater student impact.

Each of these potential benefits has a negative corollary, and much of this is dependent upon the design of the online programme and the associated support provided. It is necessary to try to anticipate some of these problems in order to direct and tailor support strategies for online learners.

Isolation and disengagement

This form of learning, particularly with distance students, can result in a sense of isolation or disengagement for students. And there can be no denying that distance students are working, in theory at least, in isolation

from other students. As Simpson (2000) maintains 'such isolation must inhibit if not prevent entirely any possibility of dialogue in their studies' (p.9). And as stated earlier, dialogue is at the heart of education. This clearly poses a major contradiction for educators working with online learners. Should we be trying to replicate face-to-face interaction when this is often impossible or should we be exploring new methods of generating dialogue with our learners that take account of the new environment in which we are operating? In addition, the lack of a formal structure or timetable which characterises face-to-face contact can exacerbate feelings of loneliness. Students may feel that the online course lacks structure, that there is no-one checking on their progress and that the online setting is merely a faceless environment. To counter isolation online communities have been developed for distance students at City, these will be considered later.

Increased staff workload

There is the perception, sometimes among students and management, that e-learning can take less time. However, as anyone involved with online learning will testify production of materials and adequate support of students using the online materials can take a phenomenal amount of time. Littlejohn and Higgison (2003) acknowledge the dilemma for academic staff as 'e-learning requires investment of time and effort [...] perhaps time and effort that would otherwise be spent on research' (p.6). Students may expect support through discussion boards, chat, email and face-to-face. This can place a huge, and often unanticipated, burden on academic staff. This workload is often seen as invisible, many lecturers in the UK are contracted to teach dependent upon face-to-face contact, not online teaching. The amount of discussion messages generated can cause resentment and time pressures. Skills in information management and organisation are necessary. How can staff, particularly librarians and information specialists help users develop these?

Increased expectations

Students often expect much more when materials are online unless clear criteria are established to address this. This is particularly true in relation to response times to messages or emails. McKenzie (2000) describes how students can come to online learning with particular assumptions related to email which can increase the workload for tutors (p.3). She advocates learning contracts and organising 'a road show to manage the expectations of potential candidates prior to signing up for the course' as ways of reducing the online "culture shock" (p.5). The MGI course provides pre-course orientation to the online learning environment for prospective students so they can ascertain what it is like to study online.

The ELU at City uses service level agreements to show staff what support and guidance they can expect from the ELU team. This enables clear boundaries to be established in terms of responsibility and ensures that

the students know where to go for support and guidance on using online resources.

In order to deal with these challenges of flexibility within an online environment we need to develop new forms of support in two key areas; the creation and formulation of staff roles and the very structure of the online environment itself. These strategies depend upon a more structured approach to provide students and staff with the confidence to explore these new types of learning in a more familiar fashion.

Strategies for support - Staff roles - who is working with online learners?

By re-evaluating staff roles the burden of support can be shared across academic and administrative staff. The introduction and spread of online learning has had a great impact on the roles of those supporting students, from academics to administrative staff. Figure one illustrates how traditional roles are being redefined by the e-learning environment.

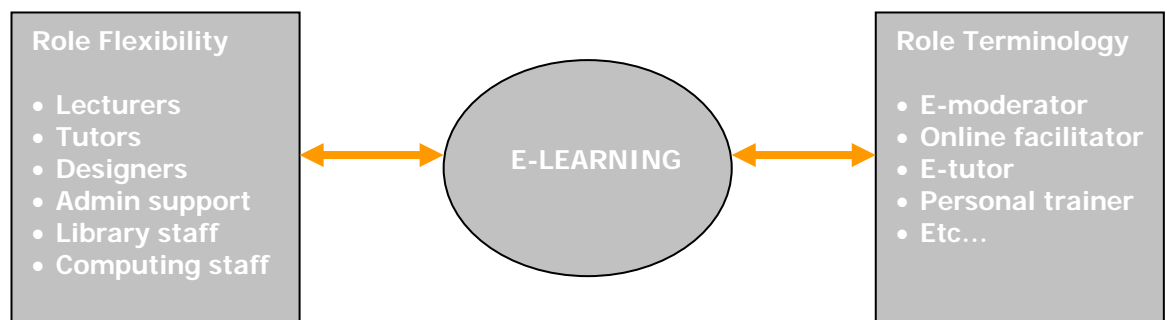


Figure one: who is working with online learners?

Gilly Salmon (2000) in her influential work, *E-Moderating*, poses a number of different titles for online educators, from 'e-moderator' to 'online manager' or even 'faceless facilitator' (pp.169-71). Her contention is that the use of new technologies for teaching and learning demands a new set of roles, or at the very least, revised terminology for those who are involved with the delivery and management of these electronic environments. Indeed, as we have seen the very flexibility offered by e-learning often results in a blurring of traditional boundaries between tutors and students. However, this greater fluidity of the learning experience may become a barrier to enhancing learning if students do not feel properly supported. Are students embracing this freedom to independently manage their own learning or can it lead to disorientation and isolation? And as academic staff, are we able to adequately respond to the new demands placed upon us by students? By looking at practical examples from City University we can provide some answers to these questions.

Change in administrative roles

To support the MGI course a new staff role was created to embrace the diverse elements of supporting online distance and face-to-face students. This role encompasses elements of traditional academic duties, for example personal tutoring and content editing. The Course Resources Manager (CRM) has responsibility for maintaining and sourcing the content within the virtual learning environment, acting as a conduit between students and academic staff and denoting the first point of call for problems relating to the course. This hybrid role reflects a new model of student support and contact with academic staff. The title 'Course Resource Manager' was also a deliberate choice in that it avoided conflation of the role with just online duties and illustrated the wider remit of the post. In order to respond to the pressures that academic staff face in terms of time management with creating new online resources for the MGI course, the CRM works to share the burden by monitoring discussion boards, checking and tracking student progress and assuming some of the pastoral care duties traditionally assumed by lecturers. The CRM also represents students' interests to other University services, such as the library and computer services, in order to present a coherent and consistent approach and ease access to diverse resources for distance students. Retention on the course was above 85% for over three years, which compared very favourably with other distance learning courses.²

By creating this role, staff on the MGI course were able to address some of the new challenges presented by the introduction of online learning. The role blurred the traditional boundary between academic and administrative staff and meant that a team-approach was taken to course delivery and management. This enabled some of the potential problems with the use of e-learning to be avoided.

Lecturer hold back

As we have seen online learning environments can provide increasing flexibility for lecturing staff who can respond to discussion postings anywhere and anytime. This can assist with the dissemination of information too as rather than answering questions on an individual face-to-face basis discussion postings are available for all to see, hence helping prevent repetition of information. However, if staff respond too rapidly to postings then unrealistic student expectations may be created and this may cause less peer support.

In a module for online tutors run by the Centre for Continuing Professional Development and Innovation (CPDI) at City, students' postings to the discussion board are assessed. The lecturer sets out clearly the

² Simpson (2000) cites that on some distance learning courses dropout rates can be as high as 58% (p.80).

requirements for the students and part of the assessment is how they respond to each other on the discussion board. This exercise substantially increased postings to the discussion (by over 50%) and encouraged peer support as students engaged and supported each other online.

Learning to holdback from the discussion board is vital for student, and lecturer, support. This model is supported by Palloff and Pratt's advice to ensure that 'balance is the key to successful participation (2001, p.36.)

Educational development and training

Staff and students need professional development, training and preparation to cope with online learning (see also Palloff and Pratt (2001), p.15). Staff, in particular, need educational development in the following areas: CMC (computer mediated conferencing) and online discussion tools; production of materials; management of online information; tracking and assessment issues.

The ELU at City ensures that no member of staff can use the online learning environment unless they have undertaken a staff development programme covering basic principles of online learning and course design. ELU staff also provide all students with a generic induction on the use of the managed learning environment; this is supported by academic staff who illustrate to students how online learning will be used in their specific programme of study and why. Students and staff can use the ELU helpdesk for technologically related queries and staff can receive individual advice and consultancies. ELU staff are enrolled as auditors on all online modules, primarily to act as mentors to staff new to online learning and provide ongoing support and guidance. This auditing role also fulfils quality assurance requirements. New e-learning programmes or modules must be signed off by the ELU as part of the validation process.

Strategies for support - Structuring the online environment

Learning materials structure

Using familiar terms, such as referring to course material as 'lectures' and asking students to engage in practical exercises, can assist students orientate themselves to the online environment and understand what is expected of them. Not all elements of the course should be re-branded to illustrate the 'e' element as Gilly Salmon suggests with her ideas for renaming 'e-tutors' (2000, pp.169-171). The MGI course is structured around weekly 'sessions' to provide continuity and structure. Each module shares a similar navigational structure and design. Online support for modules delivered in the Department of Information Science is indicated by a grading system which denotes what students can expect from that particular type of module. This system has increased student satisfaction with the online environment and assisted with managing expectations.

The model is likely to be rolled out across the University so that students understand what tools are available online.

The needs of the students combined with the requirements of the course should be carefully balanced. Making the design of the environment consistent and clearly structured can assist with student usage.

Creating online communities

The Department of Information Science uses the online learning environment to generate a sense of community by creating open spaces that all students have access to. A Resource Centre has been developed where students can share general information on issues relating to their different programme routes, engage in induction activities, discuss professional opportunities and receive information on Departmental policies and practice. The Resource Centre includes a social area where students can participate in more informal interaction. This means that the discussion areas for the teaching modules are retained solely for pedagogic discussion but still gives the students the opportunity to develop an informal network elsewhere within the online learning environment. In addition, each degree programme has an online space where students can discuss issues specific to that programme or engage in informal chat. Chat rooms are also either designated social or learning related areas. These structures provide a good foundation for the development of an online community, as well as assisting with the management and flow of information.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, in order to benefit from the flexibility inherent within the use of online education technologies for both staff and students, clear guidance and strategies are needed. Structuring the online environment and course material clearly can assist with orientation of users, ensure student engagement with the course and assist with the management of information. Channelling and organising the increase in communication and information which is generated through online learning is facilitated by transparent structures and support mechanisms. By reconsidering the roles of those working with online learners, new modes of support can be developed which are responsive to changing needs of all participants within the online environment. In order to benefit from and capitalise on the flexibility for teaching and learning encapsulated within online learning environments, attention needs to be made to creating comprehensive, organisational support strategies.

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